

The Myths of Africa

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Throughout European history, Europeans have had definite views about their neighbors in Africa. The extent of contact between Europeans and Africans has changed over the centuries, and European attitudes about Africa and Africans have varied from positive to neutral to negative. At the same time, certain inaccurate images of Africa have persisted in the European mind and have filtered down through the generations, from Ancient Greece right up to the present day, despite the fact that ample resources have been available to correct them. These are the myths of Africa.

Ancient Greek knowledge of Africa was based mostly on hearsay and indirect sources, and as a result, the Greek image of Africa was rife with fantastic stories of monsters and strange people that were nothing like the Greeks themselves. To some extent this can be expected. The ancient writers had little access to reliable information, and what holes were left in travelers' stories they had no problem filling with their own "facts." The first extensive contact between Europeans and Africans came many centuries later with exploration of the West African coast by the Portuguese and others. With direct first-hand contact with Africans, Europeans should have been able to debunk the myths carried down from the ancients, yet the myths persisted. Some of this may have been because Europeans were not used to challenging the wisdom of ancient historians, but this only goes so far in explaining how the myths of Africa, most notably the myth of African inferiority, could have survived even up to the present day.

This paper will attempt to trace the origins of these myths and to explore the ways in which they have been modified over time to suit the needs of various Europeans

throughout history, from the early explorers and traders, to the slave traders, travel writers, colonialists, and present day Europeans and Americans.

Ancient Myths

Many of the myths of Africa can be traced back to antiquity, to Ancient Greece and the first documented contact between Africans and Europeans. Lacking much concrete, first-hand knowledge of the lands south and west of Egypt, Greek writers relied on the tales told by travelers and traders that may have had only second- or third-hand contact with Africans. Herodotus and his contemporaries never traveled to Ethiopia, but instead relied on Egyptian sources – traders, travelers or slaves who might have visited or come from the lands south and west of Egypt.¹ Little evidence exists of any direct contact between Ethiopians and Greeks. Greek writers like Strabo, Diodorus, Posidonius, Agatharchides, Artemidorus, Herodotus, Homer and Pliny relied heavily on each other and copied each other wherever they could.² This is a tradition we will see repeated in the 14th and 15th centuries. In a centuries-long version of the telephone game, where information passes from one person to another to another and is twisted and changed along the way, it is easy to see how myths can develop.

Possibly one of the more insidious of the ancient myths is the lack of language among Africans. According to Herodotus, Troglodytic Ethiopians' speech is "like the squeaking of bats." They have no articulate voice, no language, no institution of

¹ Meek, C. K. *The Niger and the Classics: The History of a Name* in *The Journal of African History*, Vol. 1, No. 1. (1960), p. 2.

² Frank M. Snowden. *Blacks in Antiquity: Ethiopians in the Greco-Roman Experience*. Cambridge, Mass.,: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1970. pp 107-109.

marriage and worship only the gods of the infernal regions.³ Of the Troglodytae, Pliny says “they have no articulate voice, but only utter a kind of squeaking noise, and thus they are utterly destitute of all means of communication by language.”⁴ Going a step further, the Blemmyae lack more than just language, they do not have heads, and according to Christopher Miller, this suggests to the Greek writers a lack of knowledge, self-control, and civilization.⁵ This idea becomes more important much later, when Medieval Europeans used it to claim that Africans could not be Christian, were not created at the same time as whites, and therefore might not actually be human, helping them to justify European exploitation of Africans.

One of the most persistent of European assumptions is that “Africa produces monsters”, an idea that can be traced back to antiquity.⁶ Herodotus wrote of “dog eared men, and the headless that have eyes in their chests.”⁷ Pliny the Elder, who four centuries later copies Herodotus almost word for word, tells us that “The Blemmyae are said to have no heads, their mouths and their eyes being seated in their breasts,” the Aegipani are half goat and half man, and “The Himantopodes are a race of people with feet resembling thongs, upon which they move along by nature with a serpentine crawling kind of gait.”⁸ The impossibility of the existence of these bestial peoples serves to prove that the ancient authors had no first hand knowledge of these Africans. They

³ Christopher L. Miller. Blank Darkness : Africanist Discourse in French. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985. p. 27.

⁴ Meek, p 11.

⁵ Christopher L. Miller. Blank Darkness : Africanist Discourse in French. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985. pp. 27-28.

⁶ Miller p 4.

⁷ Miller p 3.

⁸ Meek, C. K., and C. K. M. "The Niger and the Classics: The History of a Name." Journal of African History 1.1 (1960): p. 11.

must therefore have come either from tales told and retold by travelers and traders, being embellished along the way, or simply made up by the authors to make their stories more appealing to the reader. And once one person had written it, the myth was passed on from author to author.

Cannibalism is another myth of Africa, one that persists even until modern times, with roots in Ancient times. One of the earliest mentions of cannibalism comes from Herodotus, who claims that a Scythian people, the Androphagi, ate human flesh. A 19th century edition of Herodotus locates the Androphagi in modern day northeastern Europe, so if this map accurately represents Herodotus's intent, the Androphagi were neither black nor African. Regardless of where Herodotus placed his cannibals, it can be safely argued that cannibals have always been placed just beyond the edge of civilization, "happily beyond the possibility of actual observation."⁹ Since Africa is one of those places in the world that for most of history has been just over the European horizon, it is natural that Africa would be one of the places where cannibalism has always been thought to exist.

European Exploration and Exploitation

The Portuguese, under the leadership of Prince Henry the navigator, were the first Europeans to restart the exploration of Africa in the 15th century. By the end of the century the Portuguese had explored almost the entire African coast, and were followed not long after by other European powers, such as the Dutch, French and eventually the English. European trade outposts were established along the African coast, but in the

⁹ W. Arens. The Man-Eating Myth : Anthropology & Anthropophagy. New York: Oxford University Press, 1979. p. 165.

trade that developed, the Europeans remained dependent on African middlemen to travel into the interior and bring trade goods out to the coastal outposts. Their limited attempts to push into the interior were stymied not only by African coastal chiefs' desire to maintain their own middleman status, but by the formidable obstacles presented by the continent itself. It was not until the middle of the 19th century that European technology was advanced enough to overcome the disease and rugged terrain that had made the occasional foray into the interior of West Africa likely to result in death.

The European presence in Africa did not extend significantly beyond the coast for hundreds of years, and as a result, Europeans remained very ignorant of Africa. By the end of the 16th century, the geographer Richard Hakluyt was still reliant on ancient sources when writing about Africa in *Principal Navigations of the English Nation*.¹⁰ Both Hakluyt and Sir Walter Raleigh were also dependant on Sir John Mandeville's *Travels*, which in the 15th century became one of the first widely read English discourses on Africa. Mandeville reported the existence of beings that had one giant foot whose shadow could shield the entire body from the sun or rain.¹¹ Well into the 1700s, 300 years after extensive European contact with Africa, the myth of an Africa full of monsters, first created by the ancient Greeks, was still widely accepted in Europe by the most authoritative authors and successful explorers.

¹⁰ Frank McLynn. *Hearts of Darkness : The European Exploration of Africa*. 1st Carroll & Graf ed. New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 1993. pp. 2-3.

¹¹ Alden T. Vaughan, and Virginia Mason Vaughan. "Before Othello: Elizabethan Representations of Sub-Saharan Africans." *The William and Mary Quarterly* 54.1 (1997): 22.

Why were the myths of Africa not replaced with the truth once Europeans had actual experience in Africa?¹² Christopher Miller uses the example of the French experience in Guinea (approximately the area from present day Senegal to the Congo) to show that there were definite motivations for perpetuating certain myths.

Miller describes a story, which he says is almost universally regarded by modern historians as being false, in which French merchants are the first Europeans to have contact with the blacks living there in 1364. The French are welcomed with open arms by the Guineans, who speak perfect French, and a profitable trade quickly develops. How the French language had established itself in Africa before the first Frenchman had set foot there is not explained. The point of the fictional story was to prove that the French had been trading in this area hundreds of years before other Europeans, and were actually the preferred trading partners of the Guineans. This is not only a source of pride for the French, but a way for the French to claim primacy in the area over other European powers. So the story was repeated again and again in French literature, as in the case of Villault de Bellefond's 1669 *Relation des Costes d'Afrique*, which was the first full narration on the 1364 encounter, but which drew from a long tradition of a French claim on Africa.¹³

The intentionally perpetuated myth here is that of French primacy in the area, but a secondary myth comes along for the ride and is also perpetuated: the idea that Africans have no identity or language of their own. The Africans in the French stories speak only French, and presumably, according to Miller at least, French is the only language they

¹² Miller, p. 49.

¹³ Miller, pp. 50, 52.

have, other than squeaking like bats.¹⁴ Since the stories live on in order to perpetuate the first myth, the second myth not only is perpetuated, it is augmented and made more negative. This piggybacking of myth upon myth is not uncommon in the history of myths of Africa.

We have already seen how the ancients invented the myth of Africans with no language. This myth is carried almost two thousand years forward, not just because no one has bothered to refute it, but because it serves a distinct European purpose. The French had a strong motivation to perpetuate the idea that Africans had no language and no culture of their own. The ultimate French goal in this instance is to claim primacy in Guinea, exclude their European rivals, and eventually make Guinea subject to French domination. They attempt to accomplish this by presenting Africans as lacking their own language, anxiously accepting any of the gifts of French culture and language they can get. With the myth of speechless, headless Africans already laid down by the likes of Herodotus and Pliny, this is an easy case for the French to make.

Once the idea of Guineans with no language is accepted, then the place names they might use to identify their own country can be ignored, to be replaced with French place names, thus proving that the French were the first to trade in this area. The fact that the Guineans themselves are made to prove this fact, by allegedly speaking only French and desiring nothing more than to have their cultureless society be filled with the benefits of French culture, makes the proof all the more convincing for the French.

Any French visitor to West Africa would have been hard pressed to believe that Africans had no language of their own, even if they could not understand what they were

¹⁴ Miller, p. 55.

hearing. Yet in their writings they claim the opposite. Ulterior motives cause them to perpetuate the lack of language myth.

Connecting Slavery to Black Skin

Another strong European motivation for perpetuating the myth of monstrous, language-less and Godless Africans was slavery. It was much easier to justify enslaving people who were perceived as barely human, lacking religion and being the antithesis of the civilized European. Renaissance travel writers were the first to have some measure of skepticism of the ancient sources and were the first to attempt to verify that which had always been taken as the literal truth. But even while their descriptions of the geography included more first-hand knowledge and were more accurate than their predecessors', their descriptions of the people fell back to the usual tales of the monstrous and headless. In Richard Eden and Richard Willes 1577 *History of Travayle*, we see Troglogitica, who "have no speache, but rather a grynnyng and chattering. There are also people without heades, called *Blemines*, having theyr eyes and mouth in theyr breste." The Anthopophagi "are accustomed to man[']s fleshe."¹⁵ Clearly the ideas of Herodotus, Pliny and Mandeville are alive and well.

To make matters worse for perceptions of Africans, in addition to describing the people as physically beastly, bitter scorn is heaped on them as well. Robert Gainsh, in his description of the second English voyage to equatorial Africa in 1554, describes Africans as "a people of beastly lyvyng, without a God, lawe, religion, or common

¹⁵ Vaughan and Vaughan, p. 25.

wealth.”¹⁶ In this same report he records the first instance of the English taking Africans as slaves. Eden and Wille’s *History of Travayle*, of which Gainsh’s report is a part, is the first widely read book that not only perpetuates the myth of beastly and language-less Africans, but adds to it a sharp disdain for their culture, and a connection between skin color and slavery.

George Best, in his 1578 *True Discourse of the Late Voyages of Discoverie*, equates blackness of skin with sin and inferiority by attributing it to the biblical story of the curse of Cham. Best placed Cham’s son Chus and all his progeny, who because of Cham’s sins were cursed to be “blacke and lothsome,” in Africa. The Africans’ “blacknesse proceedeth of some naturall infection... so all the whole progenie of then descended, are still polluted with the same blot of infection.”¹⁷ The African’s black skin was therefore proof of his inferiority and suitability for slavery.

Savage Africa and Slavery

As the South Atlantic slave trading system reached its peak in the 18th century, a shift can be seen in British attitudes toward Africans reflected in English literature. Where previously traders were indifferent to the Africans they dealt with, by the 18th century their writings become more and more disparaging. A vested interest in the continuation of the slave trade encouraged a view of Africans as completely savage, barbaric, and blood-thirsty. Any aspects of African society or culture that were acknowledged at all were set up as the negation of all that European civilization represented. “African religions were vile superstition; governments but cruel despotism;

¹⁶ Vaughan and Vaughan, p. 25.

¹⁷ Vaughan and Vaughan, pp. 26-7.

polygyny was not marriage, but the expression of innate lusts.”¹⁸ Some-time slave trader Archibald Dalzel¹⁹, in his 1793 *The History of Dahomy*, invoked the myth of African cannibalism and justified the slave trade by writing “Whatever the evils the slave trade may be attended with... it is mercy... to the poor retches, who... would otherwise suffer from the butcher’s knife.”²⁰ According to Dorothy Hammond and Alta Jablow, to the English,

[e]nslavement of such a degraded people was thus not only justifiable but even desirable. The character of Africans could change only for the better through contact with their European masters. Slavery, in effect, became the means of the Africans’ salvation, for it introduced them to Christianity and civilization.²¹

Eventually the myth of savage Africans would no longer be needed, once slavery and the slave trade had effectively ended. But having been firmly established for so long, it outlived slavery and had a dramatic impact on Western attitudes toward Africa for decades to come, as we shall see later on.

English Exploration and Colonialization in Africa

After getting off to a slower start than their European rivals, by the 19th century the English had established themselves as the premier power in Africa. A number of factors contributed to a change in English interactions with Africa from trading to colonizing. The British were determined to make up for the loss of the American colonies in the late 1700s, both by expanding their influence elsewhere and by interfering

¹⁸ Dorothy Hammond and Alta Jablow. *The Myth of Africa*. New York: Library of Social Science, 1977. p. 23.

¹⁹ Rawley, James A. "Further Light on Archibald Dalzel." *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 17.2 (1984): p. 317.

²⁰ Dalzel, from *The History of Dahomey* in Hammond, p 23.

²¹ Hammond, p. 23.

with the activities of their rivals, France and Spain.²² Although anti-slave trade sentiment already existed in England prior to the American Revolution, British traders were still heavily invested in the exporting slaves from Africa. After the loss of the colonies however, the English could no longer bring slaves to the North American market, and could not make inroads into Central and South American markets, which were dominated by other European powers. With the resultant breakdown in the South Atlantic trading system, suddenly the balance shifted over to the anti-slavers, and the slave trade was banned by England, in an attempt to interfere with the successful slave trades of the Spanish and French. The English turned their attention to West Africa, where they became determined to make a profit from increased involvement in the African interior.²³

When the slave trade was made illegal, the British transitioned from profiting by slavery to imagining themselves protecting Africans from the evils of slavery. One way to do this was to substitute slave trading for a trade in other goods. Increasingly seeing themselves as the bearers of the enlightenment, the British began to take on a more condescending attitude towards Africans, couching actions in terms of a humanitarian desire to lift the noble savage out of savagery.²⁴

Christian Missionaries saw the opportunity to replace the evils of slavery with Christianity, lifting Africans out of savagery in that way. Of course, an African had to be lost before he could be saved. The African had to be savage in order to justify the

²² Philip D Curtin. The Image of Africa: British Ideas and Action, 1780-1850. Madison,: University of Wisconsin Press, 1964. p 3.

²³ Curtin, p. 5-6.

²⁴ Hammond and Jablow, p. 29.

missionary's being there to convert Africans from savagery to Christianity and civilization. Missionaries therefore had their own motivations for perpetuating myths.

Explorers, too, had motivations for perpetuating and creating myths about Africa. Seeking at first the purely scientific goals of mapping (the landscape) and cataloging flora and fauna, African exploration and adventure became a way for a man to test his mettle in the manner of a proper Victorian English gentleman. Africa was a place where class boundaries might not be as impassible as they were back home, and gender roles maybe transcended, at least temporarily. David Livingstone grew up in poverty in Scotland and turned a missionary assignment in Africa in to an incredibly influential career as an explorer.²⁵ Mary Kingsley was able to achieve a level of success in her African travels, and in her recounting of those travels back home, that would simply not have been possible for a Victorian era woman in England, though she and other female explorers, notably May French Sheldon, suffered at the hands of a double standard by the press and exploring societies.²⁶

Serious exploration of Africa only became possible in the latter half of the 19th century with the discovery of quinine to prevent malaria – a disease which led to extremely high morbidity and mortality among Europeans who were not accustomed to tropical diseases. In 1848 all British governors in West Africa were directed by the British Army Medical Department to use quinine as a prophylaxis.²⁷ According to Daniel Headrick, the number of European explorers in Africa increased as a result of quinine

²⁵ "Livingstone, David." *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 2005. Encyclopædia Britannica Online 8 May 2005 <<http://www.search.eb.com.proxygw.wrlc.org/eb/article?tocId=4246>>.

²⁶ Julie English Early, Unescorted in Africa: Victorian women ethnographers toiling in the fields of sensational science, in *Journal of American culture* 18(4), pp. 67-75 (Winter 1995)

²⁷ Daniel R. Headrick. *The Tools of Empire : Technology and European Imperialism in the Nineteenth Century*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1981.

prophylaxis. “Exploration, of course, was still a dangerous business, but no longer was it quasi-suicidal.”²⁸

Travel in Africa, while still dangerous enough to test the worth of an English explorer, in truth became increasingly less dangerous as technological innovation more successfully battled the elements that had led Europeans to declare Africa the White Man’s Grave. It therefore became necessary to perpetuate the myths of savage and dangerous Africa in order to make African travels seem sufficiently adventurous, a task at which the explorers excelled in their widely-read travel diaries. Henry Stanley used the label “The Dark Continent,”²⁹ a moniker that Africa would have a hard time shaking. Mary Kingsley had a penchant for giving her readers the impression that she always remained just one step ahead of Africa’s attempts to kill her, as her adventures with the leopard she hit with a water jug, the crocodile she fought off with a paddle, and her fall into a spike-filled animal trap may attest.³⁰

With colonialization came another reworking of the myths about Africa. The British still needed Africa to be savage, primitive and lacking any of the tools of culture and self-government. But now that the British were the sovereign power in their African colonies, they needed a way to justify and enforce their methods of maintaining control. The usual myths of savagery and cannibalism were used to invoke the fear that if left on their own, Africans would simply revert back to savage customs such as cannibalism,

²⁸ Headrick, p. 70.

²⁹ Hammond and Jablow, p. 60.

³⁰ Mary Henrietta Kingsley. *Travels in West Africa*. National Geographic Adventure Classics. Washington, D.C.: Adventure Classics/National Geographic, 2002. pp. xi-xii.

human sacrifice and infanticide.³¹ The fact that these practices were extremely rare in pre-colonial African society, if they ever existed at all, does not seem to matter. It was believed that the British presence there had stamped the practices out, and allowing them to return would be seen as a failure of their Victorian values.

To the standard myths, a new one was created. The British needed to view Africans as helpless, docile and subordinate, so that they would easily submit to British domination. Similar to how the French imagined 13th century West Africans as empty vessels desiring to be filled with French culture, the British imagined their colonial African subjects as desirous of domination. To further the myth of African helplessness, the British ascribed more characteristics that made Africans seem dependant on their white overlords: Africans lacked a sense of time, they could not think abstractly, lacked imagination, could not feel gratitude or true love, and they were lazy, liars, thieves, cowards and bullies.³²

With the introduction of movies in the 1920's and 1930's, these same stereotypes were able to reach an even wider audience. Africa movies such as the *Tarzan* series and *Stanley and Livingstone* demonstrated the beneficial impact of colonialism and civilization on Africans. Africans who had been civilized were depicted as listless and lazy, and the only good Africans were the few trusty servants and porters who displayed the colonial ideals of honesty, submission and loyalty.³³

³¹ Hammond and Jablow, p. 94.

³² Hammond and Jablow, p. 96.

³³ Dunn, Kevin. "Lights...Camera...Africa: Images of Africa and Africans in Western Popular Films of the 1930s." *African Studies Review* 39.1 (1996): 169-170.

The myth of African helplessness lives on to the present day, with some unfortunate results. Curtin Keim claims that even in modern times, Westerners imagine themselves as culturally superior to Africans, thus justifying Western dominance, and they perpetuate negative myths about Africa in order to maintain that dominance. Modern American businesspeople, aid workers and bureaucrats, Keim supposes, “might have an interest in describing Africa in ways that justify the importance of their own work.”³⁴ Since the creation of independent African states in the 1960’s the West’s dual motivations of humanitarianism and the Cold War struggle has led them to perpetuate the general view of Africans as unable to help themselves.

Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe brings this Western sentiment to light by imagining the opposite case. “I read in the papers the other day a suggestion that what American needs is somehow to bring back the extended family. And I saw in my mind’s eye future African Peace Corps Volunteers coming to help you set up the system.”³⁵

The Myth of Cannibalism

Cannibalism may be the one myth with a lineage that stretches from ancient times to the present day. We have already seen how Herodotus ascribed cannibalism to societies at the very edge of his known world, and how the myth of cannibalism was widely accepted in the 16th century. And yet there may not be any conclusive proof that cannibalism has ever been a regular practice by any society anywhere in the world in all of human history. William Arens, in his book *The Man Eating Myth*, argues just that. He

³⁴ Curtis A Keim. Mistaking Africa : Curiosities and Inventions of the American Mind. Boulder: Westview Press, 1999.

³⁵ Chinua Achebe, "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness" in The Massachusetts Review, 18 #4 (Winter 1977), pp. 793-794.

concludes “I am unable to uncover adequate documentation of cannibalism as a custom in any form for any society. Rumors, suspicions, fears and accusations abound but no satisfactory first-hand accounts.”³⁶

It is not difficult to find examples that prove Arens’s point. A quick journal search of JSTOR turned up an article from the *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, the Presidential Address given by J. H. Hutton in 1943. Speaking as the president of a major group of anthropologists, Hutton accepts as fact the many tales of cannibalism throughout the world that he recounts, even though there is no evidence to back any of them up.³⁷ One of Arens’s conclusions is that anthropology as a whole has blindly accepted the existence of cannibalism, without doing the necessary field work to prove it.

Hammond and Jablow find that the theme of cannibalism is picked up in English literature on Africa beginning in the early 19th century, with authors such as Henry Stanly and Winwood Reade reporting every tale of anthropophagy they come across, and perhaps making up many stories on their own. Most travel writers of the time seemed to include cannibal stories in their books, with increased sales as a result. Actual evidence of cannibalism was not required, and most reports were based hearsay or the accusations of rival tribes.³⁸

Georg Schweinfurth, a German explorer who in 1870 was the first Westerner to visit the Mangbetu in Central Africa, described them as cannibals after being in the area

³⁶ W. Arens. *The Man-Eating Myth : Anthropology & Anthropophagy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1979. p. 21.

³⁷ J. H. Hutton, *Presidential Address: The Cannibal Complex*, *Folklore*, Vol. 54, No. 2. (Jun., 1943), pp. 274-286.

³⁸ Hammond and Jablow, pp. 94-95.

for only three weeks and not even speaking a local language.³⁹ The myth created by his report went unchallenged for almost a hundred years, and even very recently, historians commenting on the subject rely solely on Schweinfurth's analysis, and other 19th century accounts. Modern historians Peter Forbath in 1977, David Lewis in 1987 and Stanley Burnham in 1993 all continued to perpetuate the myth of cannibalism.⁴⁰

Being predisposed to the idea that cannibalism has always existed in Africa, it seems hard for some *not* to report it, despite the fact that they never saw any evidence of it. Nineteenth century travelers expected it to exist based on the myths that have existed since ancient times, and those that came afterward blindly followed their lead.

A 1951 article in the *Pittsburgh Courier*, a major African-American newspaper of the time, describes an African chief who ate his brother to restore his prestige.⁴¹

According to the most recent (2005) edition of Encyclopedia Britannica:

Though many early accounts of cannibalism probably were exaggerated or in error, the practice prevailed until modern times in parts of West and Central Africa, Melanesia (especially Fiji), New Guinea, Australia, among the Maoris of New Zealand, in some of the islands of Polynesia, among tribes of Sumatra, and in various tribes of North and South America.⁴²

If we are to believe Arens's argument, despite the fact that there is no evidence to prove that there has ever been a society that practiced cannibalism, the myth of cannibalism is alive and well right up to the present day.

³⁹ Keim, p. 43.

⁴⁰ Keim, p. 92-93.

⁴¹ James Hunter Meriwether. *Proudly We Can Be Africans : Black Americans and Africa, 1935-1961*. The John Hope Franklin Series in African American History and Culture. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002. p. 105.

⁴² "cannibalism." *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 2005. Encyclopædia Britannica Online, 5 May 2005 <<http://www.search.eb.com.proxygw.wrlc.org/eb/article?tocId=9020006>>.

Myths in American Media

Modern media, including novels, movies, television and newspapers, play an important role in informing the average American of Africa today. Post-civil rights movement studies of the American media's portrayal of Africa have found that the media is rife with the perpetuated myths of Africa that have not changed significantly for hundreds of years.

According to Kevin Dunn's study of popular Western films about Africa, a major motivation for the perpetuation of the myth of savage Africa in film is the repair of the male ego during the Great Depression. People went to see movies to escape their own problems for a few hours, "to travel to a world where white men still dominated and were in control."⁴³ Movies such as *Stanley and Livingstone*, *Trader Horn*, *King Solomon's Mines*, and the *Tarzan* series present a view similar to that put forth by the 19th century explorers. In fact they took their cue from those writers and others, such as Joseph Conrad, whose depictions of Africa were so ingrained in popular culture by that point that they were almost universally accepted.

It can be argued that a film's first goal is to make a profit. In order to make as large a profit as possible, it is necessary to appeal to as wide an audience as possible. As was the case with the 19th century travel writers, telling fantastic stories of cannibalism, polygamy, ritual murder, and human sacrifice appealed to the masses, and helped turn a profit. As is still the case today, with daytime talk shows as an example, one way to

⁴³ Dunn, Kevin. "Lights...Camera...Africa: Images of Africa and Africans in Western Popular Films of the 1930s." *African Studies Review* 39.1 (1996): 149-152.

make people feel good about themselves is to show them someone perceived to be at the lowest rung on the social ladder. Savage Africans were that lowest rung in Western film.

Dunn has compiled a list of the myths perpetuated by the films he has been studying. They include Africa as untamed wilderness, as full of savages, as inhospitable to white men, as a hunter's paradise, and as full of lazy, untrustworthy porters and other savages, except for the one loyal porter or sidekick.⁴⁴ Many are the same as have been seen for centuries, and many persist, with the help of these films' continuous circulation on television, to this day.

The distorted views of Africa and Africans portrayed in the media have an impact on race relations and on how Westerners interact with Africa. Richard Maynard, who also studied myths in Western films about Africa writes:

The implications of this misperception reflect the fundamental crisis in American race relations. As long as this erroneous concept lingers, dominant white attitudes toward African Americans as inferiors can be rationalized. How can any race of people whose ancestors were spear-toting savages be considered equal?⁴⁵

Perhaps even worse than the portrayal of Africans in media is the way that Africa is represented to students in U.S. schools. Sheila Walker's 1993 study of educational films about Africa used in U.S. schools finds that they "presented overwhelmingly inaccurate, unrepresentative, stereotyped and demeaning views of African life."⁴⁶ Westernized Africans are viewed positively, while "primitive" lifestyles and behaviors are depicted negatively. Whites are consistently shown in a positive light in these films, despite the past wrongs done by the trans-Atlantic slave trade and colonialism, and the

⁴⁴ Dunn, 149-75.

⁴⁵ Maynard, Richard A. *Africa on Film: Myth and Reality*. Rochelle Park, N.J.: Hayden Book Co., 1974. p. vi.

⁴⁶ Walker, Sheila S., and Jennifer Rasamimanana. "Tarzan in the Classroom: How "Educational" Films Mythologize Africa and Miseducate Americans." *Journal of Negro Education* 62.1 (1993): p. 3.

damage presently being done by economic and political neocolonialism.⁴⁷ Many of the films studied depicted small slices of the most stereotypical aspects of African life and presented them as indicative of all of Africa.

Is Africa the Ultimate European “Other”?

It can be argued that myths such as these can be found in European representations of many cultures. Entire careers have been made of studying the European “othering” of the orient. Certainly myths of cannibalism and savagery existed about native peoples in the Americas and in the South Pacific. But I would argue that those cases and others are different for a number of reasons.

The Arab world was treated by Europeans in ways similar to their treatment of Africa, especially in the colonial “scramble” period in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. But for many centuries before that, Arab civilization was seen as being on an equal footing in terms of power and technological advancement, whereas Africa was seen as completely devoid of history and civilization. While the Ottoman Empire was able to maintain its hold on much of southern and eastern Europe and North Africa for hundreds of years, one must go back thousands of years to find an example of African military victory over whites in Western literature. Europeans were held back from conquering Africa not by military power, but by the continent itself, by disease and the lack of harbors and navigable rivers.

North and South Americans share some of the difficulties in their relationships with Europeans. They were also seen as savage and accused of cannibalism. They were

⁴⁷ Walker, p. 8.

exploited and stolen from, but attempts to enslave them were not very successful.

Africans were brought to the Americas as slaves, not Americans to Africa. European diseases killed Americans in great numbers, where in Africa it was the Europeans who fell victim to disease. And Europeans did not know of the existence of the Americas until the 15th century, whereas knowledge of Africa went back to the earliest recorded history. Lastly, most native American societies were wiped out by Europeans in a relatively short amount of time.

Tales of cannibalism abound among Western representation of South Pacific Islanders, but the islands themselves were discovered relatively recently, and their populations are relatively small and very geographically dispersed.

The European representation of Africa is different in that for almost three thousand years, Africa has been just over the horizon of Europe. Europeans were not able to conquer all of Africa until relatively recently, and fortunately were not able to wipe African civilizations off the map.

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